

The Former Chicago Historical Society Building

632 NORTH DEARBORN STREET

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

ORIGINALLY SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO
HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS
IN JANUARY, 1976

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632 NORTH DEARBORN STREET

Date of Construction: 1892

Architect: Henry Ives Cobb

The Romanesque revival building at the northwest corner of Dearborn and Ontario streets housed the Chicago Historical Society for over thirty-five years. The building stands on property purchased in 1865 by the society as a site for its first permanent home. The heritage of Chicago is closely linked with this edifice whose picturesque style makes it a valuable historical presence in its mixed surroundings today.

The Founding and Early Years of the Chicago Historical Society

Among historical societies in the Midwest, only the state societies of Wisconsin and Minnesota antedate Chicago's, and among Chicago's libraries, museums, and civic institutions, the Chicago Historical Society ranks as the oldest. Founded in 1856 and incorporated by the State of Illinois in 1857, the Chicago Historical Society was organized by the Reverend William Barry, Jr. Although a resident of less than three years standing in the city, Barry nevertheless foresaw the need to collect and preserve the materials that had and would document not only the settlement and growth of Chicago, but also the State of Illinois and the entire territory of what was then commonly called the North-West. A native of Boston and a graduate of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, and Gottingen University in Germany, Barry held Unitarian pastorates in Massachusetts until 1853 when he retired and settled in Chicago, devoting himself to cultural and philanthropic pursuits.

The society's first president was William Hubbard Brown, noted abolitionist and a Chicago citizen for over twenty years. William B. Ogden, Chicago's first mayor, was elected a vice-president as was Jonathon Young Scammon, a prominent lawyer and banker and an early settler of the South Side. Charles H. Ray, editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, was appointed

corresponding secretary. The by-laws called for twelve standing committees, which carried such imposing titles as Aboriginal History and Monuments, Missions and Settlements, and Newspaper, Periodical and General Literature.

In the beginning the newly formed society kept its collections in a succession of temporary quarters. By 1864, the industrious society had expanded its collection so greatly that a permanent home was needed. By the following year, subscriptions had buoyed the building fund to \$30,400, and the society purchased land at the corner of Ontario and Dearborn streets. Burling and Whitehouse, the firm headed by Edward Burling (1819-1892) for whom Burling Street is named, received the commission for the society's first home, and designed a three-story brick and stone building which was completed in the autumn of 1868. Three years later the building was destroyed as the raging Chicago Fire of 1871 swept northward. In only fifteen years, the society had managed to amass a substantial and scholarly collection and this too was lost in the catastrophe of 1871. The society lost its practically complete file of Chicago newspapers, manuscripts relating to the French explorers, and hundreds of Illinois pamphlets and broadsides which were rare even then. Gone too were Civil War battle flags, both Union and captured Confederate, as well as historical paintings and portraits of early Chicagoans by George Peter Alexander Healy (1813-1894), the noted American artist.

Undaunted, the members of the society searched through the rubble for any remains of their collection. They stored what they found in the Inter-Ocean Building at the corner of Michigan and Congress only to have it destroyed in a fire which burned the southeast portion of the Loop in 1874. By 1877, however, a small one-story brick structure was completed on the north portion of the lot at Dearborn and Ontario.

Despite the vicissitudes of the previous years, the decade from 1877 to 1887 was a productive one for the society; it not only had a rapidly increasing collection of historical materials but also an expanding library and publications program. When Edward G. Mason was elected president in 1887, his first priority was a new building, permanent and fireproof. A major boost to the survival of the Chicago Historical Society was a substantial bequest from the H. D. Gilpin estate. Henry D. Gilpin, who died in 1860, was a Philadelphia lawyer, banker, and philanthropist whose strong commitment to Chicago stemmed from the financial success of his investments both in the city and in Illinois. As in the case of the two other beneficiaries of his will, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, income was to be accumulated for at least ten years and then used for the construction of a fireproof library which would be part of a larger fireproof edifice. Revenues from the Gilpin Fund plus a bequest of \$25,000 from John Crerar, who died in 1889, and the response of public-spirited citizens generated sufficient funds to begin construction, and on November 12, 1892, the cornerstone of the new building was laid.

The Architect and Architecture of the Former Chicago Historical Society Building

Henry Ives Cobb, the architect for the Former Chicago Historical Society Building, was one of Chicago's most successful architects during the 1880s and 1890s. A descendant on

both sides of old New England families, Cobb was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on August 19, 1859. He studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and began his architectural career in the Boston office of Peabody and Stearns. While employed there, he entered a competition for the Union Club in Chicago. He won the commission and moved to Chicago to supervise construction of the building. The success of the Union Club commission induced Cobb to stay in Chicago where he formed a partnership with Charles S. Frost, another architect from Boston, which lasted until 1889. Cobb and Frost's most widely acclaimed residential work was their design in 1882 for the million-dollar "castle" of the Potter Palmers which stood at 1350 Lake Shore Drive. Another equally important project was the quadrangle plan and the design of the first nineteen buildings at the University of Chicago, begun in 1891. Other noted works of Cobb include the Fisheries Building for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, the Chicago Athletic Club Building (1893), and the Chicago Post Office and Federal Building (1898). In 1902, Cobb moved to New York City where he continued to practice until his death in 1931.

While Cobb was equally competent at designing in a number of historical styles, he was particularly adept with the Romanesque. Julius Lewis, in his 1954 Master's Thesis on Henry Ives Cobb for the University of Chicago, notes:

It was in the Romanesque idiom that Cobb did his best work...His use of the Romanesque style is very personal and original.

In the *Architectural Record* for December, 1895, the architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler wrote a comprehensive review of Cobb's work, noting particularly Cobb's selection of the Romanesque style for both the Newberry Library (1892) and the Former Chicago Historical Society Building of the same date.

But he has also practiced much in the Richardsonian Romanesque, which aims not primarily at elegance, but at an effect of massiveness and vigor, and which has for its first object to break in upon the spectator's apathy. His most extensive and vigorous work in this kind is the Newberry Library, a rectangular mass in rough granite, of masonry bold in scale...Another building in the same rugged Romanesque...is that of the Chicago Historical Society, a pyramidal pile of brownstone, full of vigor and not without picturesqueness.

The style termed Richardsonian Romanesque takes its name from the architect Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886) whose influential designs had a profound effect on American architecture. In *American Architecture 1607-1976*, architectural historian Marcus Whiffen explains:

The mid-century years saw revivalism replaced by a wholly contemporary eclecticism with the French Second Empire and the English High Victorian Gothic as the predominant styles. The interpretative license afforded by these two importations was seen in American buildings of the seventies in

independent experiments, variously regarded as bold inventions or regrettable lapses in taste. Then Henry Hobson Richardson returned to historical eclecticism with his Romanesque revival and created from this base a personal style that reintegrated architectural values and is properly regarded as protomodern.

Richardsonian Romanesque is an easily identifiable and very distinctive style. It is characterized principally by solid volumes, weighty masses, dark hues, and a monolithic scale. Other salient features (all of which can be seen in the Former Chicago Historical Society Building) include rounded arches, broad roof planes, deeply recessed windows grouped in a ribbon-like fashion, and heavy masonry construction with a uniform rock-faced exterior finish. Towers and chimneys are short and squat so as to be contained within the overall massive outline of the building. Adjectives such as powerful, rugged, and virile are often used to describe the style. The general visual effect depends on the careful integration of a number of bold elements. Richardson's house for John J. Glessner (designated a Chicago Landmark on October 14, 1970), built on South Prairie Avenue in 1886-87, exemplifies the straightforward style this master architect originated. This and the Former Chicago Historical Society Building are the two foremost examples of this style in Chicago. Although Richardsonian Romanesque did not continue as a specific style beyond the turn of the century, its fundamental qualities of clarity and breadth of expression continued to be influential. It is interesting to note that when the now internationally famous architect Mies van der Rohe first came to Chicago from Germany in 1938, the Glessner House was one of the first buildings he expressed a desire to see.

The Former Chicago Historical Society Building

Basically, the Former Chicago Historical Society Building is a rectangular structure, composed of two main floors, a basement, and an attic. A hipped roof covers the building which is of masonry construction with steel I-beams supporting the floors. Rusticated Wisconsin rock-faced granite forms the facades.

Asymmetrically located on the Dearborn Street facade, the main portal is placed under a large gable and flanked by two turrets with conical roofs. These turrets are joined by a low segmental arch. Above the arch is a porch whose roof lintel is supported by two columns. The actual entrance door is deeply recessed and is surrounded by elaborately carved posts and an arch. In the tympanum of the arch is a relief carving showing the journey of the early French explorers of this area, Marquette and Joliet. Metal-covered double doors contain twenty-four panels incised with a leaf motif. On either side of the imposing entranceway, the first-floor windows are grouped together under heavy lintels. Almost equally heavy horizontal stone mullions divide the windows about one-third of the way from the top. Similarly grouped arched windows fill the space above.

The Ontario Street side of the building consists of two parts. The eastern section is longer, punctuated on the first floor by two groupings of four windows. Above, on the second floor,

is a continuous band of ten identical arched windows. The western portion of the Ontario Street facade is dominated by a grand arch set within a single gable. The arch is divided into two smaller arches, and light mullions and tracery further divide the window area.

The interior of the building was expressly designed to meet the requirements of the society as one of Chicago's important cultural and educational institutions. These features were emphasized in the *Chicago Tribune's* article for November 13, 1892:

In the basement will be a hall 28 x 33 feet in size, storerooms, supper and waiting rooms, cloak and toilet rooms, and in the rear heating apparatus. On the first floor will be the secretary's office, the reception and reading rooms. The picture gallery, the John Crerar lecture room, and the Gilpin Library, which will be a single room two stories in height, with gallery, and extending across the west end of the building. On the second floor will be the museum, the director's room, a workroom, and an art gallery.

The building fulfilled the requirements of the society until 1923 when the vast Gunther Collection was purchased. Other additions to the archives and the increased activities of the society necessitated additional space, and plans for a new building were underway by 1928. In November, 1931, the Chicago Historical Society moved out of this building to its present location at Clark Street and North Avenue.

Considered one of the handsomest buildings in Chicago when it was built, the Former Chicago Historical Society Building stands today as an important example of how a prominent Chicago architect adapted the Richardsonian Romanesque for a public building. Dignified and imposing, the building is also a reminder of the spirit, energy, and vision that motivated the leaders of the Chicago Historical Society, always deeply convinced of their city's destiny. In 1877, society president I. N. Arnold expressed this sentiment:

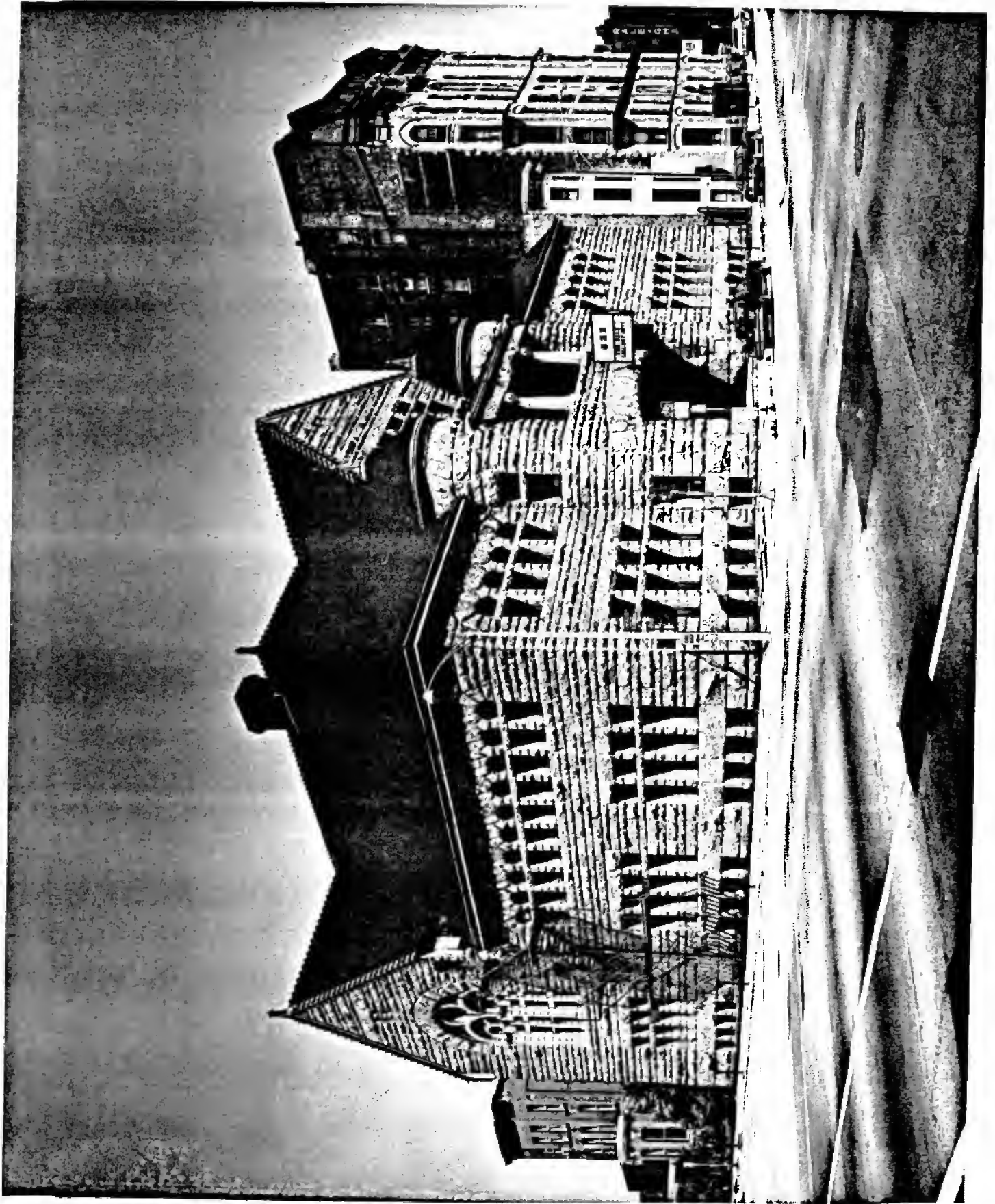
Chicago must not follow Carthage, or Liverpool, or Amsterdam, alone, as models; let her learn, also, from Alexandria, Athens, and Florence...We have boasted long enough of our grain elevators, our railroads, our trade in wheat and lumber, our business palaces; let us have libraries, galleries of art, scientific museums, noble architecture, and public parks, specimens of landscape gardening, and a local literature; otherwise there is danger that Chicago will become merely a place where ambitious young men will come to make money and achieve a fortune and then go elsewhere to enjoy it.

The Former Chicago Historical Society Building is an important monument in Chicago, exemplifying the architectural, cultural, and historic heritage of the City.

OPPOSITE:

The Former Chicago Historical Society Building exhibits all the important features of the Richardsonian Romanesque style: rounded arches, broad roof planes, deeply recessed windows grouped in a ribbon-like fashion, and heavy masonry construction.

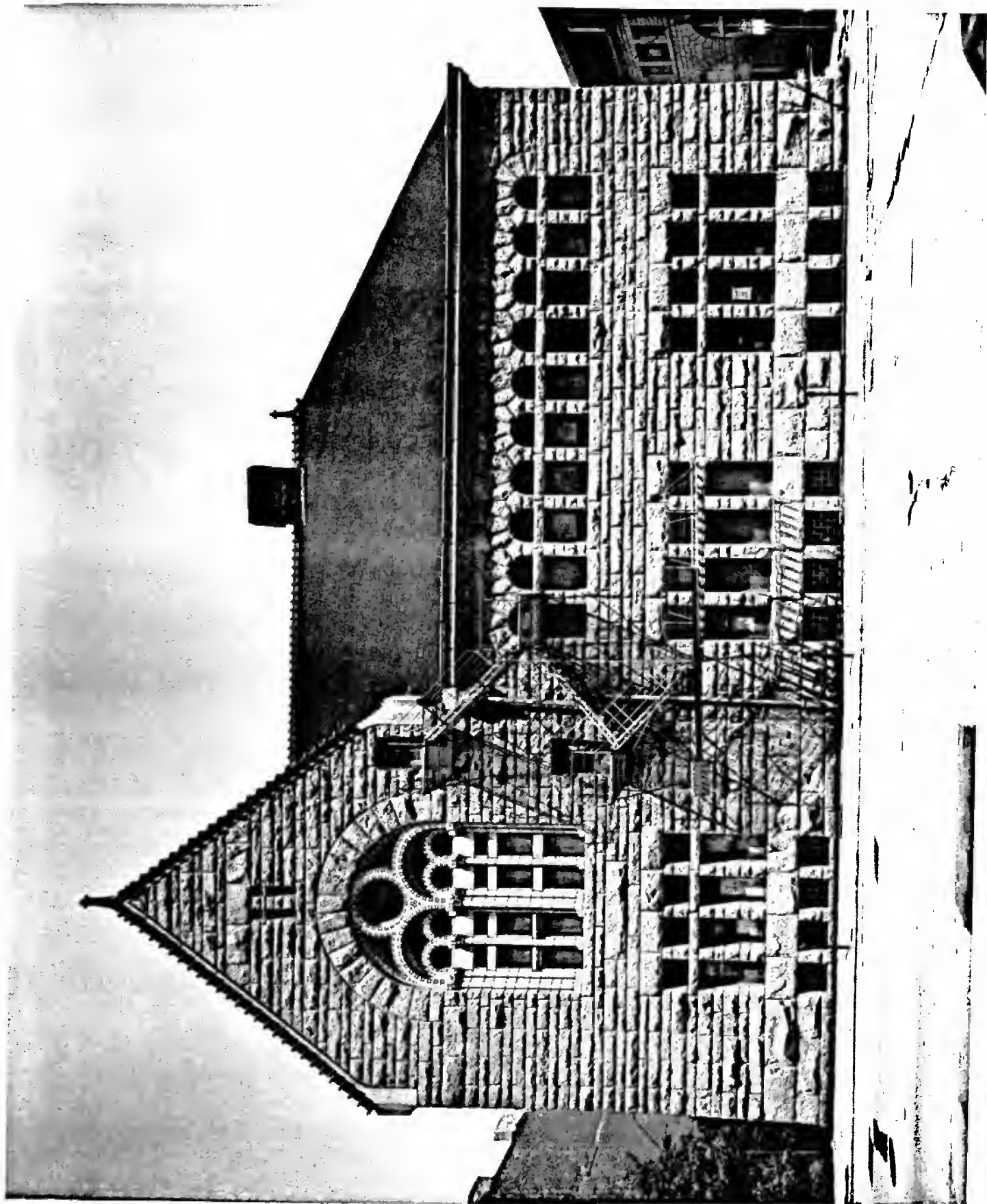
(Steve Beal, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

A grand arch set within a single gable dominates the Ontario Street facade. The arch is divided into two smaller arches, and light mullions and tracery further divide the window area.

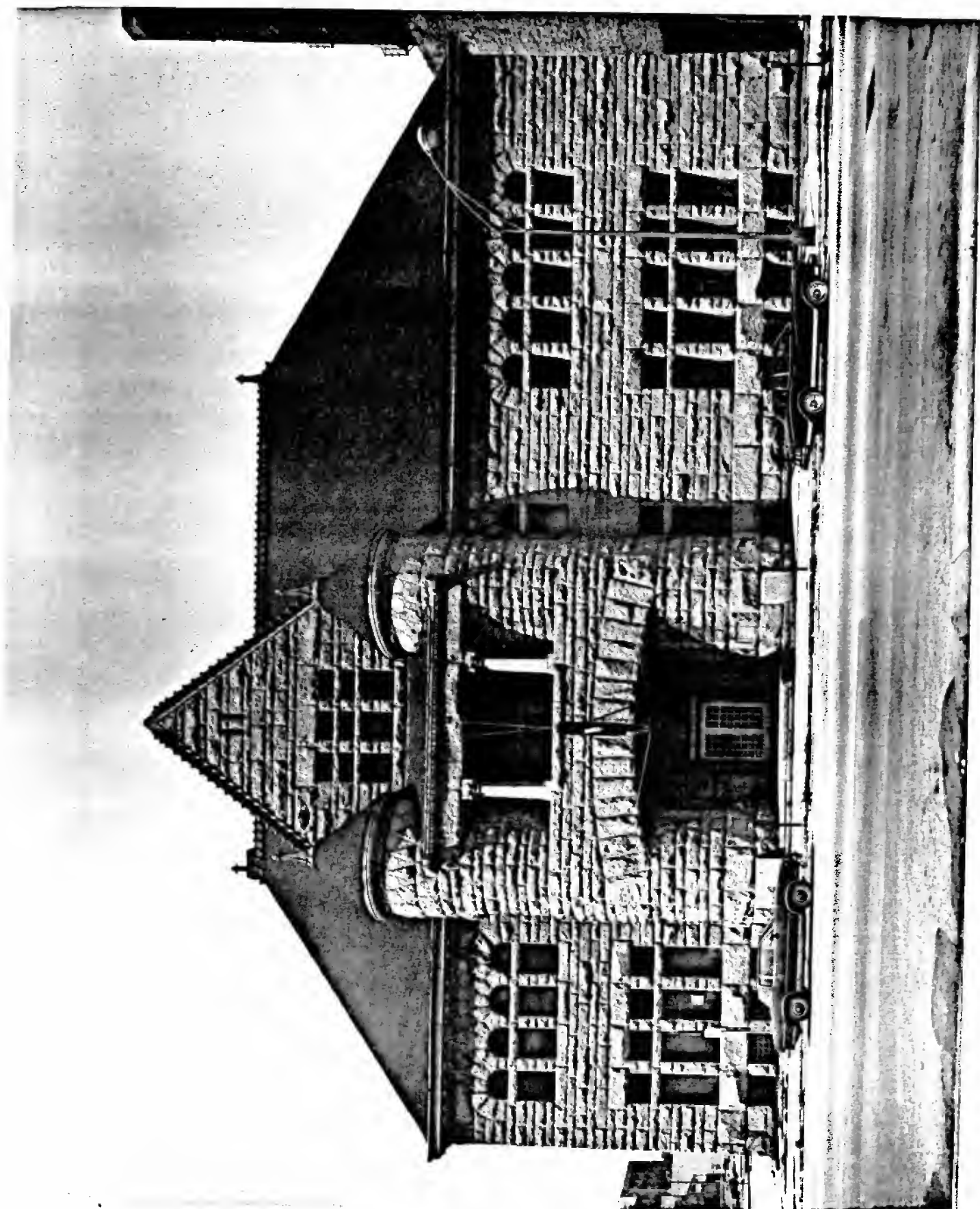
(Steve Beal, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

Asymmetrically located on the Dearborn Street facade, the main portal is placed under a large gable and flanked by two turrets with conical roofs.

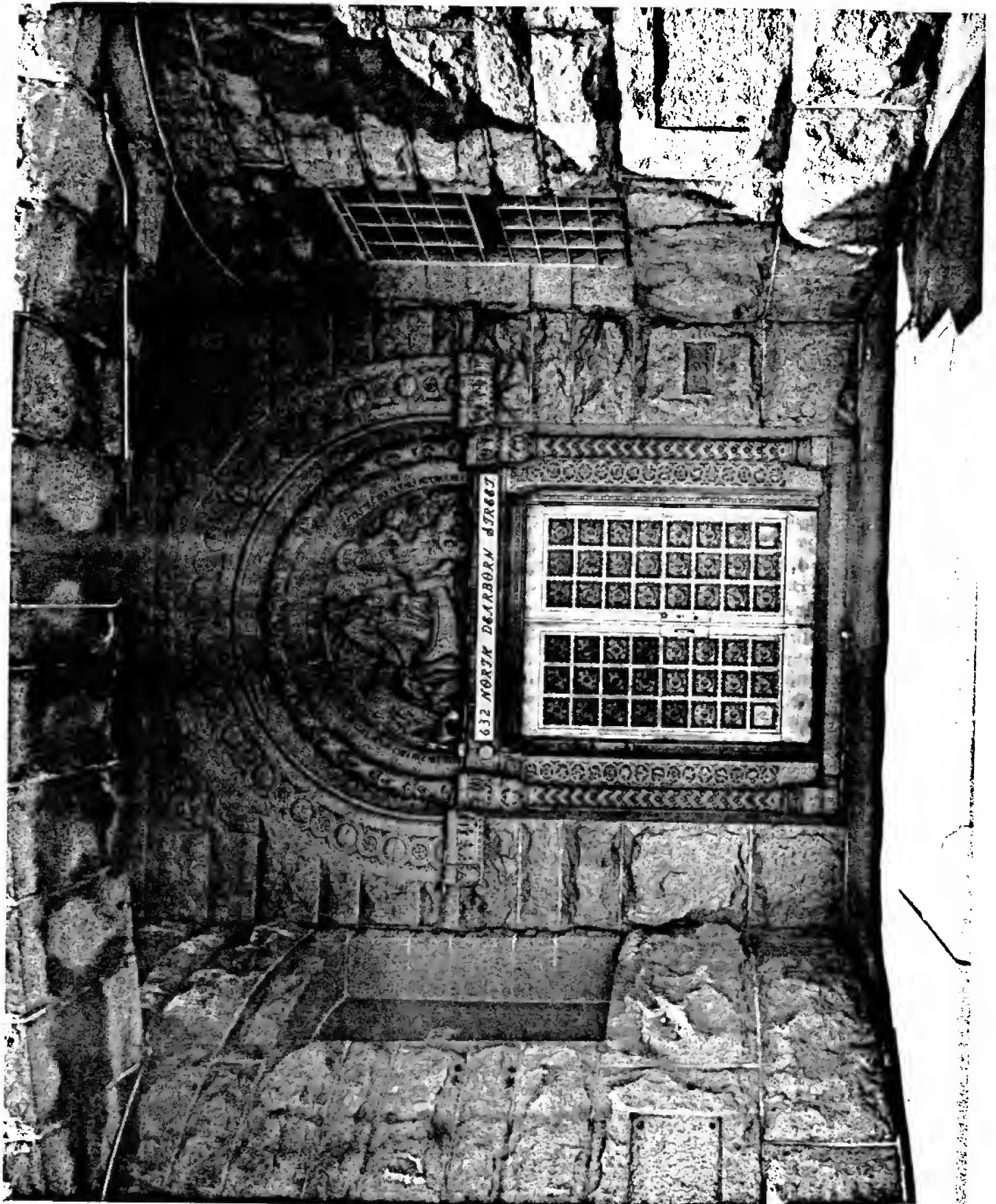
(Steve Beal, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

In the tympanum of the arch surmounting the entrance door is a relief carving showing the journey of the early French explorers of this area, Marquette and Joliet. The metal panels of the double doors are incised with a leaf motif.

(Steve Beal, photographer)



The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.



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